

Puget Sound Recreational Fisheries Enhancement Program



Problem: In establishing the Puget Sound Recreational Fishery Enhancement (PSRFE) program in 1993, the State Legislature set a goal for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) of producing 3 million delayed-release chinook per year. Delaying the release of those fish from hatchery facilities makes them less likely to leave the Sound, where they are available to sport fisheries throughout the year.

In recent years, however, the goal of producing 3 million delayed-release chinook has become increasingly difficult to attain. Key factors cited in an April 2010 state performance audit of the PSRFE program include:

- Concerns about the effect of releasing millions of hatchery salmon on wild fish protected under the federal Endangered Species Act.
- Declining survival rates for delayed-salmon, due mostly to environmental conditions in Puget Sound.
- Reduced capacity at state hatcheries to hold and feed fish for a year.

On a separate matter, the Joint Legislative Affairs Review Committee (JLARC) has found that provisions PSRFE's authorizing statute regarding bottomfish aquaculture does not reflect WDFW's current focus on recovering depleted stocks in Puget Sound.

Solution: WDFW is seeking to streamline administration of the program by amending or removing several sections of RCW 77.105. Two specific changes would follow recommendations in the performance audit and the JLARC analysis. Those are:

- Salmon – WDFW is seeking to replace the requirement to produce 3 million delayed-release chinook per year with a provision that gives the program's oversight committee and WDFW the authority to establish outcome-based production goals that maximize recreational fishing opportunities in Puget Sound, while protecting wild fish.
- Bottomfish – WDFW is seeking to amend the statute to reflect the department's current focus on rebuilding depleted stocks of bottomfish in Puget Sound.

Benefits: The delayed-release program, which provides recreational fishing opportunities for tens of thousands of anglers, contributes to the \$23 million in economic benefits generated by Puget Sound salmon fisheries each year. Statutory changes proposed by WDFW would maintain sustainable fishing opportunities, while aligning the program with current conservation goals for salmon and other species.

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Puget Sound Recreational Fishery Enhancement Program— Proposal detail:

Establishing program goals: The proposal would authorize the WDFW director and the Puget Sound Recreational Fishery Enhancement (PSRFE) program's oversight committee to develop, review and approve outcome-based goals for the program. These goals would ensure the program is consistent with changes in hatchery practices made to protect wild fish, while maximizing recreational fishing opportunities in Puget Sound. New goals would address different release strategies for chinook, as well as the production of other salmon species.

Evaluating the program: The WDFW director would evaluate the effectiveness of the Puget Sound fishery enhancement program, considering the number of daily angler fishing trips in Puget Sound and the percentage of the program's hatchery-produced fish that survive to contribute to the recreational fishery.

Reporting on the program: The WDFW director and the PSRFE Oversight Committee would report annually to the Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission and biennially to the Legislature on the program goals and WDFW's effectiveness in achieving those goals.

Bottomfish aquaculture: WDFW would continue to support research, development and implementation of hatchery programs for marine bottomfish species. However, the effort would focus specifically on depleted stocks of bottomfish that are important to the recreational fishery. The proposal would also allow WDFW to develop man-made habitats to restore degraded rockfish habitat.

Streamlining: This proposal would remove requirements of the original legislation that specify production goals and direct WDFW to focus efforts on hatchery salmon production and continued support of research and development of hatchery programs for marine bottomfish species in Puget Sound.